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`Gay Cancer' Focus of Hearing April 16, 1982

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At a first-of-its-kind Congressional hearing held at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, federal health officials said an epidemic of rare and fatal diseases primarily affecting Gay men continues at a rate of one new case per day and that research into the cause and prevention of the ailments may be hampered by Reagan administration budget cuts.

The hearing – of the House of Representatives subcommittee on Health and the Environment – was called by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Ca), the subcommittee's chairman. The session was held on April 13.

News of the diseases surfaced last May when the Federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that Gay men in their 20s and 30s were contracting *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia and Kaposi's sarcoma, a form of cancer. The CDC said that in the U.S., Kaposi's sarcoma has previously affected mostly elderly men and rarely caused death. *Pneumocystis pneumonia*, a parasitic infection of the lungs, had been known to affect mainly persons whose immune systems were weakened by medication for cancer or for organ transplants.

Although victims of the current outbreak appeared outwardly healthy before being diagnosed with either the Kaposi's or pneumonia, health officials said they were later found to have a serious malfunctioning of their body's immune system.

Dr. James W. Curran, coordinator for the CDC's Task Force on Kaposi's Sarcoma and Opportunistic Infections, told the hearing the phenomenon appears to be "the first documented epidemic of community-acquired immune dysfunction."

As of the date of the hearing, Curran said, 300 cases of Kaposi's, *pneumocystis pneumonia*, or other "opportunistic infections" among young adults have been reported since 1979. (By April 15, the number reached 307.) He said 119 of the victims have died.

"Two hundred and ninety of the 300 cases have occurred among men," Curran told the subcommittee. "Of the 290 men, 242 are homosexual or bisexual, 30 are heterosexual, and 18 are men whose sexual preference is unknown."

Curran called the distribution of the illness "highly unusual." He noted that over 95 percent of the cases were reported in the U.S., with 52 percent from New York City alone. He said 22 percent of the cases were reported from California, with the remaining cases coming from 19 other states and six foreign countries.

At least one case of *pneumocystis pneumonia* has been reported in the Washington metropolitan area, according to the CDC.

Both Curran and an official from the National Cancer Institute said government health specialists have launched a number of different studies and research projects into the causes and possible prevention of diseases. Both agencies have special contingency funds to deal with health problems such as the Kaposi's and pneumocystis pneumonia outbreaks, officials said.

However, Waxman said he is concerned that overall budget cuts initiated by President Reagan will harm research efforts.

"I want to be especially blunt about the political aspects of Kaposi's sarcoma," Rep. Waxman said. "This horrible disease afflicts members of one of the nation's most stigmatized and discriminated against minorities."

"There is no doubt in my mind," Waxman continued, "that if the same disease had appeared among Americans of Norwegian descent, or among tennis players, rather than among Gay males, the responses of the government and the medical community would have been different."

Waxman noted the outbreak of Legionnaire's Disease several years ago appeared to receive greater attention and funding for research and treatment than the latest outbreaks of Kaposi's sarcoma and pneumocystis pneumonia among gay men have.

Waxman's assessment, however, is disputed by Dr. Bruce A. Chabner, acting director of the National Cancer Institute's Division of Cancer Treatment. Chabner, who testified at the hearing, later told the Blade the National Cancer Institute has sufficient funds to research the new ailments and asserted that Kaposi's sarcoma has received a "tremendous" amount of attention from the medical community during the past year.

"Advancements in research in this area will have a profound effect on research into all cancers," Chabner said. "Thirteen papers have already been written on the subject."

Chabner nevertheless noted that budget cuts could adversely affect the CDC, which handles research into the epidemiological aspects of the two diseases. This aspect which involves investigating possible environmental causes and means through which the diseases can be transmitted from one person to another, could be crucial to finding an ultimate solution to the problem, health specialists have said.

Curran told the hearing that results from some of the CDC's ongoing investigations into the outbreaks have raised some alarming possibilities. Preliminary results have shown evidence of "immune abnormalities in a sizable minority of homosexual men who have no evidence of clinical disease." The men, he noted, live in the same cities in which the cases of cancer and pneumonia outbreaks have occurred and they report similarities in lifestyle, sexual practice, and use of nitrite inhalant drugs (poppers).

"The meaning of these findings is as yet unclear, but they suggest that the 300 reported cases may represent only the tip of the iceberg of this public health problem," Curran said.

"The high mortality rate and continuing occurrence of these serious illnesses requires immediate, intense, and coordinated efforts," Curran said, "to identify risk factors; to clarify whether the acquired immune deficiency is caused by a transmissible agent or agents, chemical or drug exposures, or a combination of these; to focus on laboratory investigations; to identify new therapeutic approaches for these diseases; and to define the natural history of what appears to be the much more common, but apparently milder manifestations of immune deficiencies."

Chabner said the Cancer Institute plans to seek answers to these questions through the funding of special "targeted" grants to universities and other institutions capable of conducting approved research.

He also said important clues to possible causes and risk factors related to the diseases have been received from disease victims and their friends.

"I therefore encourage and urge all people who have observations and suggestions on any aspect of this very serious illness to report their thoughts to any of the physicians here today or to other interested physicians and scientists," Chabner told the hearing.

Others testifying at the session were Thomas Nyland, director of medical services, the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center; Stan Matek, president, American Public Health Association; James Lipsett, executive committee member of the Gay-oriented Southern California Physicians for Human Rights; Michael Gottlieb, assistant professor at the UCLA School of Medicine; and Marcus A. Conant, associate clinical professor of medicine and co-director of the Kaposi's Sarcoma Clinic and the University of California at San Francisco.

Also testifying was Bobbi Campbell, a registered nurse in San Francisco and Kaposi's sarcoma victim.